

Original Paper

Terrorism and Early Childhood: Our Role on the Slippery Slope of Racism

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that early childhood professionals have a key role in providing learning opportunities that aim to prevent children placing their feet on the beginning of the slippery slope of racism. At the bottom of this slippery slope of racism, as we have seen in recent world events, are acts of extremist terrorism. This responsibility is increasingly important given that in many countries political rhetoric is leaning further towards far right extremism accompanied by forms of nationalism where those who are different (for example Muslims and refugee groups) are being portrayed as threatening standards of living of citizens in their host countries. As professionals we have a responsibility to identify early (often, on the surface, benign) acts, reflect on the value position underpinning such acts, and provide opportunities for children to learn to value and respect the differences they see every day in the people around them. In this paper I provide suggestions as to the kinds of behaviours (and the value positions underpinning them) that we see in young children and the ways we might address these.

Keywords

racism, terrorism, extremism, values, intervention, early childhood

1. Introduction

Why do early childhood educators need to think about terrorism? They may certainly work with children whom they sometimes feel act like little terrors, but the kind of extremism that resulted in the terrorist attacks in Christchurch recently, and in multiple other extremist terrorist attacks in different parts of the world, are not currently a concern in the early childhood playground. It is, however, my contention that they should be.

2. Terrorism

The extremes of behaviour we see in terrorist attacks have their beginnings in the everyday interactions between young children and the world around them. There is an argument in logic called the slippery slope argument: this proposes that once a step is taken in one direction then there is a slide down a slippery slope, and that whilst the first step is unlikely to be morally problematic, the behaviours arising from a position at the bottom of the slippery slope are extremely concerning (den Hartogh, 1998). In applying this argument to the extremist, white supremacist terrorism that was evident in Christchurch on 15 March 2019 (Barton, 2019), I argue that children's early racist responses, (and in more general terms, the way they react to those who are different from them) represents the first step on the slippery slope. Children do not necessarily slide all the way down the slope as they grow and learn, but being on the slope increases the risk of sliding down part of the way, if not all of the way, to the bottom. Early childhood professionals are in an ideal position to turn children's feet away from the slippery slope towards a different path whose outcome is respect, acceptance and valuing of all people. Failure to intervene in the early years of life enables those children whose feet are at the top of the slippery slope to slide further down the slope, with the eventual outcome, after many more life experiences, a much greater risk of taking an extremist position which then may result in acts of terrorism. This is not to ignore the positioning of early childhood educators themselves, as they may also be positioned somewhere on the slippery slope. This paper argues that it is possible to identify the beginning steps on the slippery slope in the attitudes and behaviours of children, and of their educators. Identification of these first steps then creates opportunities for redirection, different types of learning targeted at preventing racism.

It is rare for early childhood professionals to delve into literature on terrorism but it is important to understand that experts in this area are clear that terrorism must be understood by taking a life course approach (Corner, Bouhana, & Gill, 2019). Using a social learning approach, Corner et al. (2019) argue that children with limitations in executive functioning are less likely to develop an internal moral compass that enables them to evaluate the values and practices they experience around them and thus are more susceptible to internalising these without question. In other words, if children are exposed to attitudes and practices located on the slippery slope, they are more likely to internalise these. Carson, James and O'Neal (2019) take this idea further in their examination of the impact of the family context on a particular terrorist duo. They demonstrated in their case study that parents provided the socialisation experiences for their children that began the internalisation of values and beliefs that ultimately led to an act of terrorism. Research clearly shows the links between parental attitudes and children's attitudes related to right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance (Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007). These two factors are considered key underlying factors contributing to some terrorist acts. Right-wing authoritarianism is an uncritical subjugation to authority accompanied by aggression towards those who do not similarly submit. Social dominance is the desire for the in-group (those who are like us) to be positioned as superior, and therefore dominate, others.

Kruglanski (2019) and colleagues (e.g., Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, & Webber, 2017) pull together a number of factors in their 3-N model of understanding violent extremism. These acts, they argue are underpinned by a need to establish personal significance accompanied by a narrative that identifies particular behaviours as the way to achieve that significance and a network that validates such beliefs and actions. It seems that right wing terrorism is particularly linked to the 3-N effects, as it is this form of belief that identifies a risk to the believer based on perceptions of others as threats: threats to their lifestyle, threats to the “purity” of their race/their country, threats to their beliefs (Silva, Duran, Freilich, & Chermak, 2019). Carson et al. (2019) argue that these perceptions are more commonly transmitted initially in families, and individuals who hold these beliefs then seek out those who are like-minded. It is here social media plays a role in creating a network where people can share similar ideas, and obtain support for their thinking by interacting with others who, they perceive, are like themselves (Leevia, Freilich, & Chermak, 2019). The 3-N model proposes that interacting within such like-minded networks continues to support the growth of radicalisation, and thus, reinforces the path down the slippery slope to terrorism.

3. Terrorism and Early Childhood

Translating this into early childhood language, we can see that the underpinnings of terrorism are located in a need to belong, a context that teaches aggression as the most effective way to be noticed and to “fit in”, and a family and/or peer group who model and reinforce the use of violence as a way of belonging, fitting in and problem solving. Thus I argue it is the responsibility of early childhood professionals to provide appropriate learning opportunities that prevent children from taking the first step on the slippery slope towards terrorism, but rather support them onto a path that leads them to respect, acceptance and valuing of all people. It is also the responsibility of early childhood professionals to reflect where they stand in relation to the slippery slope: how they understand racism, their biases and their unconscious enactment of racist attitudes.

That means we need to learn to see, in children’s behaviour (and our own behaviour), these early steps and we need to be sufficiently confident to offer learning opportunities to divert children who are vulnerable in this respect to an alternative path. We need to understand the importance of family and community in our efforts, and be absolutely sure that, no matter the experiences to which children are subject outside of our service, inside our service they have as many opportunities as are required to ensure all children feel they belong and are valued, provide a different narrative (way to behave), and create a community that reflects in everything we do and say, strategies of peace, respect and non-violence.

4. Working with Young Children to Avoid the Slippery Slope that Leads to Terrorism

This begins with observing the way children (and ourselves) respond to those who are different than them. In an ideal world we would like children to experience difference as something interesting, and

thus react towards those who are different with interest and respect. Ideally we want children to be willing to spend time getting to know an individual so that they react to that person as an individual, not as a member of a particular category. In order for this to happen, children need to not be inhibited by any perceived difference, but rather encouraged to approach each individual as a unique and special person. I have previously proposed a model of the different ways human respond to those who are different, and linked these to the way in which services are delivered (Sims, 2011, 2015). I will summarise this model here as it provides a guide as to what we can look for in children's behaviours and how we can respond to divert children from the slippery slope to terrorism.

The most obvious first step on the slippery slope is behaviours that reflect an attitude that positions difference not only as wrong, but so wrong that it should not be accepted in any way. In its extreme form this attitude is enacted in the holocaust. Here, Jews were positioned as: "no longer people, but beasts. This is therefore not a humanitarian, but a surgical task. Here we must make radical incision. Otherwise Europe will be ruined by the Jewish sickness" (Supple, 1998, p. 130). We see similar positioning in Australia in relation to Indigenous people. To the early settlers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not human, they were instead the missing link in evolution between true humans and our subhuman prehistoric ancestors (Crawford, 1989). Given they were not human, it was considered appropriate for the government to enact a Die Out Policy which assumed the eventual extinction of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander race was inevitable as they could not win in evolutionary competition with the superior white human race (Jones, 1996). In our modern times we see similar attitudes held towards so-called "illegal migrants". Martin (2015) discusses the "moral panic" generated by those who are positioned in the media and public discourse as "boat people" which reflects "deep-rooted anxieties about Australia's national identity and way of life, relating, among other things, to fear of Asian 'invasion' and concern with multiculturalism" (p. 205). The right wing exclusionary rhetoric is clear in such reactions which continue to the present day. In the early childhood playground we may see such reactions when children refuse to play with a child with different coloured skin because that child is "dirty" (as so movingly described in Lamb, 2019).

A second approach to the slippery slope is one where children express negative ideas about difference but have been taught to believe that focusing on changing those who are different to become more like us (the hegemony) is what we should be doing. We see a good example of this in the Stolen Children policies of the Australian government. Here the aim was to remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities and rear them in a white environment. The goal of these policies was to eradicate their Aboriginality and turn them into people whose behaviour and way of life was indistinguishable from that of white Australians. In other words the aim was to "... forget there were Aborigines in Australia ..." (Mr Neville, the WA delegate to the 1937 Conference in Aboriginal Affairs, cited in Beresford & Omaji, 1998, p. 14). We all now know the terrible long term impact this approach has had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Wilson, 1997), an impact that is now demonstrated to have crossed at least 3 generations (Zubrick et al., 1995; Zubrick et al.,

1997; Zubrick et al., 2005), contributing to ongoing Indigenous disadvantage.

Assimilation is another example of an approach that focuses on changing those who are different (fixing) so that they become more like us. Pauline Hanson articulated this clearly in her maiden speech to Parliament when she said Asian migrants "... have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate" (Hanson, 1996). Such approaches have not changed. In 2016 Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party re-entered national politics this time voicing an anti-Muslim rhetoric in place of the previous anti-Asian stance which reaffirmed "her belief in both the danger and worthlessness of non-western culture to everyday Australian society" (Reid, 2019, p. 79). Reid (2019, p. 77) further argues that the pressure is so strong to assimilate that migrants learn to frame their identity in ways that "actively negates their own difference in order to conform to the dominant socio-economic code".

The extreme end point of the slippery slope can be seen in the inhumane approaches aimed at changing those who are different justified on the basis that the end justifies the means. For example, people with disability in behaviour management programmes were punished using electric shock devices for many years, resulting, for a small number, in death for which it was rare for a homicide charge to be laid (Johnson, 2003). Restraints were also used in such programmes (also in a small number of cases leading to deaths) as the punishment for such behaviours as refusing to hand over a family photo or becoming upset when not given permission to go to the toilet (Weiss, 1999). In the early childhood playground we see the subtle (and not so subtle) messages conveyed to children by their peers and by staff about "how things are done around here". The food racism discussed by Lamb (2019), who observed that children who brought rice and beans for lunch instead of sandwiches were teased, is an example. In the Lamb study some children resolved this stress by simply refusing to eat lunch.

The third way to approach the slippery slope is to develop beliefs that focus on how we are all the same and ignore the ways in which we are different. This is a particularly insidious approach to the slippery slope because it is often framed in terms of defining equity as equal opportunity. We are all the same under the skin is a popular trope. However, a focus on how we are all the same creates space for arguments of reverse racism. Pauline Hanson injected this claim into her rhetoric saying: "Our current system is a type of ... 'reverse racism' ... We do not want a society in Australia in which one group enjoy one set of privileges and another group enjoy another set of privileges" (Hanson, 1996, p. no page numbers). In more recent times Ho et al. (2019, p. 163) argue:

...social groups can construct and frame "reverse racism" into a fact precisely because neoconservatism, neoliberalism, and white supremacy worked hard to delink racism from race. Deracinating racism from race, just like acting as if power is separate from facts, allows powerful interests to disembed racialized hierarchies from racialized groups and categories, and correspondingly, to powerfully claim their social fact as truth.

Ignoring the ways we are different (in the interests of focusing on how we are all the same) results in services that do not work to create equity of outcome, or in Australian terms, to close the gap between

those who are advantaged and those who are not. In Australia for example the education system is set up in the belief that all children have equal opportunity to participate (after all, a certain number of years of education are mandated by law) and therefore, because they have equal opportunity to participate, the assumption is they have equal opportunity to succeed. Much of the research on educational outcomes demonstrates that this is absolutely not the case; that children who enter school disadvantaged tend to remain disadvantaged throughout their schooling, and continue disadvantaged through their adult lives (Hanson et al., 2017; Heckman, 2011; Kim, Evans, Chen, Miller, & Seeman, 2018; McEwen & McEwen, 2017; Scorza et al., 2019). In a review of 31 countries, van Noord, Spruyt, Kuppens and Spears (2019) found that education becomes increasingly able to differentiate between different social groups as students pass through the different levels to higher education; in other words education is not offering all students an equal chance to succeed. The Closing the Gap policies in Australia, aimed at ameliorating the poorer outcomes of Indigenous people across a wide range of indicators have met with only limited success (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017, 2018) precisely because the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are different from white Australians has not adequately been addressed in the implementation of programmes (Parter, Wilson, & Hartz, 2019).

Ignoring difference in the early childhood setting means that we provide learning opportunities that benefit children from the majority group. Children who are different may or may not learn from these opportunities but they are unlikely to be able to reach their potential. Ignoring difference also means that we discourage children from noticing, or talking about difference because our focus is on how we are all the same. Children naturally notice difference from a very young age. It is the way we respond to their noticing that teaches them how they should respond. For example if we react with embarrassment, and perhaps reprimand the child for being rude, when a child declaims loudly, in public: “Look at that man’s funny hair”, we are teaching children to be uncomfortable around difference. Children soon learn that difference is not to be spoken about unless in whispers behind the backs of those they are noticing. Such behaviour is not respectful. Nor does it encourage children to spend time with peers who are different.

Research identifies that children are subject to implicit bias, meaning they are more likely to associate, and feel comfortable with, those who are more like themselves and as part of this they are more likely to classify those from a different racial background as angry rather than happy when asked to identify facial expressions in photographs (Setoh et al., 2019). Implicit bias is unconscious (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006) so it is likely to be something that early childhood professionals have not identified in themselves, making it more likely they will not see it when it operates in children. However, when we allow this to operate unchallenged, we create a situation where children who are alike interact with each other, and those who are different interact in their own peer groups with little cross-group experiences. Given one of the key factors in the 3-N model of extremism (Kruglanski, 2019; Kruglanski et al., 2017) is the role of social networks of like-minded people who reinforce particular

understandings of the world, the need to support children to experience diverse peer groups is crucially important. When we observe children consistently playing in groups of children who are similar to themselves, it is our responsibility to support them to interact, in positive ways, with other peers. We need also to model this in our practice, so that we engage deliberately and with respect, with parents and community members from all different kinds of backgrounds.

5. Conclusion

It is my argument that early childhood professionals must think about the slippery slope as it applies to terrorism, particularly as we currently live in a world that is characterised by a toxic political climate that allows hatred to flourish (Barton, 2019). Waterford (2019, p. 2) argues that whilst our politicians are not responsible for the Christchurch terrorist attack, they must still “take their share of responsibility for creating the atmosphere that made it possible”. In the same way, we, as early childhood professionals, must take responsibility for doing our utmost to prevent children (and ourselves) stepping onto the start of the slippery slope of racism. This is not a task we can shirk—the consequences are too dire if we do so. We have to learn to recognise these first, early, superficial and apparently innocent behaviours and provide opportunities for children to learn to walk a different path. Not one of us wants to be the educator who one day sees one of “our” children in the world media committing such an atrocity. We need to act today, and every day, to prevent this.

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